



CARTOON SALOON AT 25

Song of the Sea

Song of the Sea

Directed by: Tomm Moore

©: Cartoon Saloon, Melusine Productions, The Big Farm, Superprod, Nørlum

Executive Producers: Ross Murray, Paul Young

Produced by: Tomm Moore, Ross Murray, Paul Young, Stephan Roelants, Isabelle Truc, Serge Umé, Marc Umé, Clément Calvet, Jérémie Fajner, Frederik Villumsen, Claus Toksvig Kjaer

Line Producer: Thibaut Ruby

Production Managers: Katja Schumann, Fabien Renelli, Claus Toksvig Kjaer, Serge Umé, Véronique Maessen

1st Assistant Director Animation and Posing: Fabian Erlinghäuser

1st Assistant Director Layout: Stuart Shankly

Screenplay: Will Collins

Based on an original story by: Tomm Moore

Head of Story: Nora Twomey

Head of Special Effects: Jeremy Purcell

Special Effects Supervisors: Marc Umé, Eric Dupont

Animation Supervisors: Gilles Rudziak, Frederik Villumsen

Editor: Darragh Byrne

Production Design and Art Direction: Adrien Méridgeau

Original Music Composed and Orchestrated by: Bruno Coulais

In collaboration with: Kila

Sound Design and Sound Edit: Félix Davin, Alexandre Jaclain

Sound Mix: Nostradine Benguezou, Marie Doyeux

Voice Cast:

David Rawle (Ben)

Brendan Gleeson (Conor/Mac Lir)

Fionnuala Flanagan (Granny/Macha)

Lisa Hannigan (Bronach)

Lucy O'Connell (Saoirse)

Jon Kenny (Ferry Dan/The Great Seanachai)

Pat Shortt (Lug)

Colm Ó Snodaigh (Mossy)

Liam Hourican (Spud/bus driver)

Kevin Swierszcz (young Ben)

Ireland-Luxembourg-Belgium-France-Denmark

2014©

94 mins

Digital

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If you set out to assess the global state of play for feature animation, you might come up with three creative hot spots. The US west coast, home to the likes of Pixar, Disney and DreamWorks, is an obvious industry leader, and Japan serves an eager domestic market, while its Studio Ghibli operation is revered at home and abroad. There's also, however, a more recent beacon of enterprise in Ireland, where Kilkenny-based outfit Cartoon Saloon has turned out two highly distinctive, lovingly crafted features in the past six years, both of which have been Oscar-nominated – *The Secret of Kells* and *Song of the Sea*. Indeed, the latter, a gorgeous and affecting tale of mythical sea creatures, faerie folk and a family in crisis, recently achieved a major coup at the Irish Film and Television Awards by triumphing over fierce competition – including Gerard Barrett's *Glassland* and Lenny Abrahamson's *Frank* – to take home the Best Film gong, an extremely rare instance of an animated feature vanquishing its live-action rivals. 'Normally you go to these bashes and it's like you're sitting at the kiddies' table,' reflects Tomm Moore, Cartoon Saloon's co-founder, and the co-writer and director of *Song*. 'I didn't even bother preparing a speech, so it all came as a bit of a shock, especially in such a strong year for Irish film.'

That said, he's still very much in favour of the Academy Awards system of a separate category for animation ('otherwise we'd never get any recognition'), a validation of the notion that 'animation is a medium and not a genre, so you can go absolutely anywhere with it'. And he knows whereof he speaks. Back in 2009, Moore and Cartoon Saloon announced their international arrival by taking animation to a place where few anticipated it might go. *The Secret of Kells* was a family-oriented animated feature about Irish monks protecting a treasured medieval manuscript from the threat of invading Norsemen. A tribute to one of Ireland's greatest cultural treasures, the Book of Kells, its distinctive visual style deliberately suggested the fattened perspectives and two-dimensionality of illuminated manuscripts and stained-glass windows – all the while delivering a child-friendly adventure with forest sprites, a plucky junior protagonist and scary cave-dwelling beasties. After years of toil involving a fantail of European co-production partners, suddenly Moore found himself fêted by the Pixar animators he'd long admired, and basking in the affirmation of an Oscar nod.

Delightful as *The Secret of Kells* is, Moore's *Song of the Sea* marks an advance in pretty much every respect. It puts younger viewers right at the heart of a story that's driven by the threatened disintegration of a modern family. Think Bambi had it bad? Poor Ben loses his mum when she's bringing his sister Saoirse into this world, his lighthouse-keeper dad struggles to cope so Granny threatens to march the two kids off to Dublin, and all the while it's increasingly evident that Saoirse shares her mother's lineage from the selkies – sea sprites gifted with a magical song, yet also threatened by a fearsome witch bent on turning Ireland's few remaining faerie folk to stone. Laid out in an even more sophisticated palette, playing softer watercolour textures against the clean, lucid lines of the character design, Moore's fascination with Irish folklore here takes on a new emotional heft. The film deftly threads relatable contemporary characters into a narrative founded on the primal templates of ancient sea stories, their metaphors for loss and perseverance still sharply relevant for a fractured household trying to self-heal. The result kept the six-year-old at the screening I attended absolutely transfixed throughout, had your correspondent

CARTOON SALOON AT 25

The Secret of Kells

Sat 6 Jan 12:10

Song of the Sea

Sat 13 Jan 12:00

The Short Films of Cartoon Saloon + Q&A with Cartoon Saloon's Nora Twomey, Tomm Moore and Paul Young

Sat 20 Jan 11:30

The Breadwinner + Q&A with Nora Twomey

Sat 20 Jan 14:10

Wolfwalkers + Q&A with director Tomm Moore

Sat 21 Jan 12:15

My Father's Dragon

Sat 27 Jan 12:00

Funday Workshop:

Puffin Rock and the New Friends

Sun 28 Jan 10:30

Funday: Puffin Rock and the New Friends

Sun 28 Jan 11:45

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mopping up the tears by its close, and represents a combination of storytelling integrity and visual craftsmanship that make it one of the rare recent animated features that's definitely in the Studio Ghibli class.

There's a little chuckle from Mr Moore over the Skype connection to his Kilkenny office when I tell him I cried both times I watched *Song of the Sea*, a project he says was inspired by the cross-generational appeal of Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro*, lingering memories of 1992's Irish childhood fable *Into the West*, and a holiday encounter with sundry dead seals on a Cork beach. 'The owner of the cottage we were renting told us the fishermen had killed them out of frustration with the way the industry was going,' the amiable 38-year-old says. 'But she also said that was something which would never have happened in the old days because people then had more of a connection with the environment. Thinking about that led me to a book called *The People of the Sea*, about the whole array of selkie legends. All that folklore's packed with symbolism if you read through Joseph Campbell, and the sea itself obviously has a profound resonance in terms of psychology. You travel westwards in Ireland, as the kids did in *Into the West* and you feel like you're approaching the edge of something. That huge expanse of the Atlantic before you, it's an obvious metaphor for passing over.'

As he's talking, I hear the faint scrape of pen on paper and, with the video link switched off, I make a guess that he's getting on with an animator's working day. With the Nickelodeon kids' TV series *Puffin Rock* already keeping the company ticking over, next up for Cartoon Saloon is *The Breadwinner*, a story set in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan from his *Kells* co-director Nora Twomey, for which he's contributing design and storyboard ideas. Such daring subject matter is evidence of their operation's outward-seeking vision, yet what's creatively striking about *Kells* and even stronger in *Song* is the forthright reclamation of Irish folklore from the realms of tourist-tat leprechauniana. With its W.B. Yeats quotations and its cast of faeries, witches and giants ready to drop in the odd line of untranslated Gaelic, there's certainly an element of cultural pride at work – though Moore points out that he came to it through a slightly circuitous cinematic route.

'I was always really impressed by the way Studio Ghibli could take the spirit of Japanese animism and thread that into modern stories, so I was looking for an opportunity to do that in an Irish context. I grew up in an atmosphere where anything Gaelic was deemed old-fashioned and boring, almost like you were ashamed of it, but so much has changed. It's a different society now.'

Given the economic demise of the Celtic Tiger, and the evident decline in the power of the Catholic Church, is modern Ireland now looking for a new self-image and is its own pre-Christian culture a part of that equation?

'The country is wondering how to define itself, but I don't see that looking backwards will be part of that process. I see my son, who's been right the way through the Irish-speaking schools programme, and while obviously aware of the richness of the folklore, he's a completely modern individual with far broader horizons than I had growing up. That's the generation I'm making films for, the ones who can consume this stuff alongside Japanese anime and Hollywood animation and not see it as somehow second-best. The sort of myths and legends which were attractive to Yeats can't just be left to fossilise – they have to be reappropriated and remade for today.'

Trevor Johnston, *Sight and Sound*, August 2015